

## **The Politics of Mythical Space in Pakistani Poetry Written in English**

**Amra Raza\***

### **Abstract**

Mythical Space as opposed to physical space is extremely fertile and capable of unifying diverse elements. It is also self reflexive. Its creation and evolution becomes a quest to find the meaning of existence and man's place in the cosmos. This paper examines how Pakistani poets, in particular Alamgir Hashmi, and to a certain extent Zulfikar Ghose, writing in English draw on mythical space as a frame of reference and apply complex techniques such as adept incisions and replacements, miniaturizing, elastic expansion, spatio-temporal manipulation, subversion and the use of literary devices in order to effect appropriation and contemporizing. This process leads to a reframing of selected Greek myths (related to Orpheus and Eurydice, Ulysses' encounter with the Sirens, Penelope, Agamemnon and Iphigenia )in which Homer's position as omniscient narrator is challenged, and the Pakistani poet's predicament of writing in English are explored.

Mythical space, as opposed to physical space, is more fertile, capable of unifying diverse elements and self reflexive. Eva M. Thury and Margaret K. Devinney in Introduction to Mythology : Contemporary Approaches to Classical and World Myths, after a detailed charting of the uses of mythology in western poetry (632-633), observe that:

Poetry is a kind of Literature that especially lends itself to the inclusion of mythological material. Because it relies on expressing ideas and feelings in a kind of figurative shorthand, poetry can be greatly enriched through the use of images from the storehouse of mythology. (637)

The point is that mythical or imaginative space and scientific or geometric space do have a common element because:

Mythical thinking reveals the same process of schematization: as it progresses, it too discloses an increasing endeavour to articulate mythical world

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## ***Amra Raza***

view effects a construction of space which, though far from identical in content, is nevertheless analogous in form to the construction of geometrical space and the building up of empirical, objective 'nature'. (Cassirer 85)

Thus it is very fertile ground for spatial transformation. Yi-Fu Tuan in Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience identifies two types of mythical space. The first type refers to the fuzzy area of defective knowledge which envelops the known and triggers a conceptual extension of familiar spaces to the unknown. The second type of mythical space is better articulated and more intensely adhered to as a component of world view or cosmology (86-88). In Hashmi it is the latter which most clearly evokes a frame of reference.

In Hashmi's poem "Of the First Things" (MSK11) we witness the creation of mythical space first hand. We are told, "First, there is the water / already hard to see except for what you see in it, / just as it is hard to say what time is / except by the happenings it takes" (1-4 MSK), in the manner of a mythical genesis. The connection between spatiality and temporality is established through the rhythmic evocation of cosmic time. The creation continues in the same poem as:

All the same,  
You see the water,  
all at once:  
the bottom of the pool with its dark  
murk of leaves, twigs, branches, reeds;  
the dead leaves of the tree, dropped years ago,  
looking at themselves.           (5-11 MSK)

It becomes obvious to the reader that mythical space is structural and differentiated from mathematical or geometric space which is functional. The impression is that:

Here the whole does not 'become' by growing genetically from its elements according to a determinate rule; we find rather a purely static relationship of inherence. Regardless of how far we divide, we find in each part the form, the structure of the whole. (Cassirer 88-89)

### ***The Politics of Mythical Space in Pakistani Poetry Written in English***

“Of the First Things” (MSK11) continues with the acknowledgement of the opposition of light and dark, an inherent feature in all cosmological world views. Hashmi writes:

Beyond this,  
there is the sky with its sailing clouds, the sun;  
.....  
So I saw the colours and shades come,  
uttering cries in the sun,  
and in rain. (19-20, 33-35 MSK)

These lines find support in Himmelsbild and Weltanschauung im Wandel Der Zeiten where Troels states:

...the sense of place and receptivity to impressions of light are two fundamental and deep seated manifestations of the human intelligence....The progressive view of the difference between day and night, light and darkness, is the innermost nerve of all human cultural development.(5)

And it would be safe to agree that, “The development of the mythical feeling of space always starts from the opposition of day and night, light and darkness... The victory of light is the origin of the world and the world order” (Cassirer 96).

What gradually becomes apparent from this exploration is that time in mythic space may be plotted on the basis of events of creation (i.e. the cosmogenic) or on the basis of the diurnal and seasonal (i.e. the astronomic). It is in this way that the creation and evolution of mythic space in Hashmi becomes a quest to find the meaning of existence and man’s place in the cosmos. Once Hashmi had demonstrated how mythical space is constructed in general, he explores how these mythic spaces may be used as frames of reference for further spatial transformation. For this purpose, in many of his poems, he draws specifically on the Greek cosmological order and mythological histories. Ken Dowden in The Uses of Greek Mythology writes:

A myth may trace something of its construction to history, may be used in a superficial way to explain a ritual, may, when more deeply probed tell us something about that ritual, may – viewed together with other myths form part of a systematic, even conscious way of dividing up and thinking about the perceived world. (38)

**Amra Raza**

What Hashmi does is however something much more complex which would become apparent from a detailed analysis of those poems which use Greek myth as a frame of reference.

“I, Orpheus” (SMOP22-23) draws on the Greek mythical space inhabited by the pre Homeric Thracian musician and poet ‘Orpheus’, who was also a member of the argonautic expedition. The title prepares us for the contemporizing and appropriation of the Greek frame of reference. Hashmi opens the poem with sibilant alliteration which has an onomatopoeic effect, activating a portal for the mythical to connect with the personal in:

I could once break the chains  
the Sirens song the sailors into  
and save the ship from foundering  
on the tempting rock in the lonely sea.  
And if to my music the stones or the trees  
danced, and came round to be with me,  
it was a delight, but an ordinary matter. (1-7 SMOP)

The ‘I’ identification with Orpheus is primarily at the level of the poet for whom poetry has not served its purpose, no matter how entertaining it may have been to others. Similarly no matter how ravishing Orpheus’ lyre playing was, capable of taming wild beasts, prompting trees, rocks and mountains to follow him, and saving the Argonauts from the siren’s song, it could not rescue Eurydice, his beloved wife (who had died from snake bite), from the Underworld.

It is noteworthy that the close adherence to the frame of the original myth is a structural necessity for the comparative and referential to be triggered especially if the attempt at appropriation and contemporaneity is to be effected organically.

The first indication of the reframing of the mythical in the personal is the choice of the first person narrative voice. It is with almost surgical precision that Hashmi incises mythical space and implants the ‘I’ to create the impression of shared space. Through this technique the gifts, dilemma and fate of Orpheus, Hashmi and any other Pakistani poet choosing English as a medium of expression become one in:

My music is old, has fine new strings and needs regeneration.  
.....  
But let me now break this old lyre.  
The gods will make a constellation of it

## ***The Politics of Mythical Space in Pakistani Poetry Written in English***

Out of it, while my head for love's sake  
Continues to divine their riddles and ache. (44, 47-50 SMOP)

Like Orpheus, the Pakistani poet writing in English is caught between two worlds, and cannot look back to his own vernacular which is inadequate to express his bicultural experience. Thus he faces the same fate as Orpheus who was torn apart by the Eumenides, but whose head kept singing for Eurydice. It is in this way that character and event transcend the enclosing frame of myth to be subsumed in modern space lending myth a historical continuity, personal connectivity and thus authenticity. Northrop Frye in Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays writes:

Far from being primitive fictions – about the natural world, some supposed ancestor, or tribal practice – myths are reflections of profound reality. They dramatically represent our deepest instinctive understandings. (1)

However, a closer analysis of the spatiotemporal structure of “I, Orpheus” indicates how Hashmi, in the process of reframing, also highlights the difference between mythical and historical space.

The poem is clearly divided into two parts based on the spatiotemporal dimension. In the first part the poet persona is projected into the mythic space of ‘time before time’ with, “I could once break the chains” (1 SMOP), when, “the spheres revolved round love and its works” (8 SMOP). The temporal is reinforced by establishing Eurydice’s genealogical origins as the daughter of a wood nymph and Apollo, in “Now on each summer bough the country birds chatter, / and she, the dryad who was of this same land / and congenial tree, is not here” (10-12 SMOP). It becomes evident that:

By being thrust back into temporal distance, by being situated in the depths of the past, a particular content is not only established as sacred, as mythically and religiously significant, but also justified as such ... and existence itself, the nature of things, becomes truly understandable to mythical feeling and thinking only when seen in this perspective. (Cassirer 105)

The second part of “I, Orpheus” evokes cosmic time and the timeless quest of the artist to fully comprehend and control the potential and power of his art in:

**Amra Raza**

Whatever I did once, thousands of years ago  
in the twilight of here and that other, yesterday  
the whole world knows.

.....  
It is only I, and perhaps she and the rocks  
and the woods, that I did it for and might do it again.(38-40,45-  
46 SMOP)

Thus, for mythical time the past is an absolute which requires no cause or effect. However, although its frame of reference is the past, myth looks forward to the future. Historical time, on the other hand, is dependant upon the sequential and constantly looks back into the past. This is because:

History dissolves being into the never ending sequence of becoming, in which no point is singled out, but every point indicates to one farther back, so that regression into the past becomes a regressus in infinitum. Myth... also draws a line between being and having become, between past and present, but once this past is obtained, myth remains in it as something permanent and unquestionable...Thus it is understandable that mythical consciousness...has sometimes been called a timeless consciousness. (Cassirer 106)

Whereas in "I, Orpheus" Hashmi reworks the mythical frame of reference through regression into the past, in "Because You Wanted to Hear How it Really Was" (SMOP 27) there is a projection into the future as the poem charts the mind space of a Ulysses contemplating a return to Penelope from Troy in the twentieth century. The structural irony of the poem rests on five questions the persona poses which confirm the futility of a return. What is interesting is that Ulysses' return to Ithaca after twenty years in the mythical frame of reference is reworked through a futuristic 'back to the future' spatiotemporal frame breaking into the twentieth century. The persona's mind space both evokes and breaks the mythic frame in:

Return \_\_ ?  
To see that her tapestry  
never got started  
and her macramé  
was bought at Jelmoli  
for 50 francs?  
The gold bangles I gave her bent

***The Politics of Mythical Space in Pakistani Poetry Written in English***

out of shape from repeated shocks?

.....

and her knitting needles  
are used as chopsticks?

.....

and serves your neighbour  
that between swigs

of Johnny Walker for concert tickets,

unravelling the house of Theseus? (1-8, 11-12, 15-18 SMOP)

The anticipation of Penelope's mundane routine in the twentieth century is meant to contrast sharply with the fantastical heroic space of myth which Ulysses inhabits. The return is thus seen as improbable, not on account of divine intervention but because of personal choice, possibly governed by the realization that the displacement would also affect the heroic frame of reference, as the twentieth century hero would no longer be required to battle mythical creatures, but withstand the monotony of modern life. The romantic sanctity and superiority of mythical space as a reliable frame of reference is punctured in:

The epics are longer

because they must fabricate

the future's pretexts,

the designs of patchwork quilts,

which even were not enough

to cover herself. ("Because You Wanted To Hear How It Really Was")

19-24 SMOP)

The mythical consciousness of space in focusing on the absolute, passes over details and in centralizing masculine feats of strength marginalizes feminine suffering and sacrifice.

It is significant to mention that hardly any Pakistani poet writing in English has attempted to chart mythical space like Hashmi, much less use such techniques as reframing, replacing or recreation. Zulfikar Ghose is among the few who have used the mythical frame, but without the complex spatiality generated in Hashmi. A comparative analysis between Ghose's poem "Come, Sailor" (SP 46-47) and Hashmi's, "Because You Wanted to Hear How it really Was" (SMOP 27) would demonstrate this fact. Whereas Ghose selects the Latin name for his 'Odysseus' persona, Hashmi prefers the roman 'Ulysses'. In both poems there is an identification of the poet with the mythical character. In Ghose this is made evident in:

## ***Amra Raza***

... The hills of Rome, the isles  
of Greece, even there, Odysseus. And still,  
when you stand beside the sails  
and look down at the tall  
waves shouldering your ship, there, Odysseus, like  
a drowned sailor  
a body floats, its face your and mine...("Come Sailor" 20-26  
SP)

In Hashmi's poem *Ulysses*, in contemplating a return to Ithaca, is contemplating a breaking through the space and time barrier into the twentieth century, but in Ghose there is a nostalgic desire for adventure after a return to Ithaca, a desire for insulation in mythical space:

... The seas  
twitch, and again the voice you heard  
in ancient mythologies  
calls: Come, sailor , journey towards the cold fog.("Come  
Sailor"39-42  
SP)

In "Iphigenia at Aulis" (37 IOP) it is the title which is used to evoke a frame of reference. The mythical space, in which the four line exchange between father and daughter is framed, is the gathering of Agamemnon's army for a second time after about ten years at the Boetian harbour of Aulis.

The Achaean's fleet could not have favourable wind to sail in order to attack Troy, as prophesied by Calchas, until Agamemnon sacrificed his most beautiful daughter Iphigenia to Artemis in order to atone for his sin of having insulted the goddess. The reframing of mythical space is effected through a brief dialogue between a father who speaks in an affected tone using what sounds like a Scottish endearment, and the daughter who replies with an expletive characteristic of teenage American slang:

Come, lassie, we must  
have some wind today  
Shit, dad, you must  
be out of your mind. (1-4 IOP)

The irreverent tapinosis in the above quoted lines magnifies the father's deceit in under playing the nature of sacrifice demanded from his daughter. The poem arrests more specifically the moment in mythical space when Iphigenia realized that Agamemnon has 'framed' her, luring her to Mycenae under false



### ***The Politics of Mythical Space in Pakistani Poetry Written in English***

pretexts. It is the moment of anagnorisis – a recognition of the ultimate betrayal: that of a father of his child. This leads to the peripeteia. The linguistic reframing results in subversion. This undermines the moral power of faith and the wisdom of patriarchal authority, which is perverted and questioned. Thus the contemporizing of the myth inverts the sacrifice to a murder with motive, and reverses natural world order in which a father plans ruthlessly to kill a child instead of protect it. The rebellious retort instead of a reverent reply serves to demystify myth and leads to sacred mythical space being profaned. The defiant protest instead of the expected compliance points to Hashmi's replacing the frame of reference instead of just reframing an existing space of knowledge.

The notion of replacing instead of reframing, and thus re-presenting a frame of reference is explored more fully as a technique of spatial construction in "Encounter with the Sirens" (MSK17-18). This representation of mythical space is triggered through inversion at many different levels, of the Siren episode in Homer's *Odyssey* (Book VII 242-3) by Hashmi. At the surface level Hashmi's subtitle of the same poem, 'Epic Poem in Miniature' indicates that whereas the spatial magnitude of Homer's narrative is of epic proportion, Hashmi's is nucleated to miniature. A closer examination of the siren episode in both poems reveals a more complex relationship. In Homer's poem, Ulysses and his crew's encounter with two sirens occupies a brief episodic space in Book Seven. And in being followed and preceded by other, equally, fantastic events, does not have a greater significance than Ulysses' encounter with other mythical creatures. Thus the encounter is a small part of a much larger whole. In Hashmi's poem, however, the siren episode alone forms the subject of the entire poem. It is expanded to give the impression of epic proportions as the poem is divided into three books (although these span only seven brief stanzas). Thus in paradoxically reducing the mythical frame, he is expanding the episode, and in miniaturizing epic space he is providing the reader with a much larger perspective. Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* comments on this technique of miniaturizing:

The cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world, the better I possess it. But in doing this, it must be understood that values become condensed and enriched in miniature...One must go beyond logic in order to experience what is large in what is small... miniature is one of the refuges of greatness. (155)

Where Hashmi is adept at miniaturizing mythical space, he is also capable of effecting an elastic expansion. In "The Trojans" (SMOP 25) Hashmi draws on the nine dynasties which considered King Priam as their supreme leader.

**Amra Raza**

They ruled the greater part of the coastal regions of Asia Minor. Hashmi conveys the vastness of mythic space by what can only be called a type of 'verbal stretching'. He writes:

They were really super,  
extensible  
to the imagination's  
own stretch;  
be it Sparta.  
Salamis,  
Corinth or Troy,  
.....  
and with each  
warlike thrust  
from island to island  
making  
the unwritten history. (2-8, 16-20 SMOP)

By positioning himself in the space before history was written, mythic space is stretched to infinity, an all encompassing entity which is being created and which is creating, both the medium and receptacle of spatial construction, much like outer space.

It is from the opening line of "Encounter with the Sirens" (MSK17-18) that Hashmi demonstrates overconfidence in challenging Homer's position of authority as omniscient narrator. Hashmi writes:

Ulysses stopped his ears  
with wax and had himself bound  
to the mast of his ship,  
though it was known to the world  
that such things were of no help. (I. 1-5 MSK)

The poet has replaced Homer's frame of reference in which Ulysses did not put wax in his ears, because he wanted to hear the sirens' song. Replacement is followed by recreation of mythical space as Hashmi takes the reader into confidence by stating:

Now the Sirens have a weapon more  
fatal than song. And though such a thing  
has never happened, someone might possibly  
have escaped their singing; but  
from their silence never. (II.16-20 MSK)

### ***The Politics of Mythical Space in Pakistani Poetry Written in English***

Telling the reader that the power of the sirens' silence is greater than that of their song posits the poet at a prehomeric vantage point as Hashmi seems to divulge information which Homer did not have access to. It seems as if Hashmi has taken it upon himself not only to plug the holes in mythical space, but also to correct and thus replace the Ulysses and Sirens encounter in a recreation of the myth as, "When Ulysses approached them, / the potent songstresses did not care/ to sing" (II .21-23 MSK).

This complex replacement and recreation also inverts the longstanding heroic stature of Ulysses to that of an egotistical fool as he "trusted absolutely / the handful of wax and his fathom / of chain, and in innocent elation / loving his little stratagem / sailed out to meet the Sirens" (I. 11-15 MSK). And in reporting, "the bliss on his face" (II. 24 MSK) and that, "he believed / they were accompaniments to their air / which died unheard around him" (III. 33-5 MSK), Hashmi is in a way contesting narrator space.

The impression created is that those who have a chance to hear the Sirens' song may be doomed, but those who have the chance and do not avail it are definitely doomed. In Homer, the Sirens sing of the fact that:

No man has passed our isle in his black ship  
Until he's heard the sweet song from our lips;  
And when he leaves, the listener has received  
delight and knowledge of so many things.  
We know the Argives' and the Trojan's griefs:  
their tribulations on the plain of Troy  
because the gods had willed it so. We  
know all things that come to pass on fruitful earth.  
("Odyssey" II 242-243)

Thus if siren-song can confer power over the earthly and temporal, then there is every probability that siren-silence would empower the listener over the divine and spatial.

Hashmi's replacement of the Greek frame of reference has much more serious implications for the artist. It is the artist's predicament to suffer self destruction, to hear what can never be heard, and thus create what never was. Everyone can hear the siren song, but it is only the true artist who would learn to hear himself listen. And thus "Yet listen well. Not to my words, /but to the tumult that rages in/your body when you listen to yourself" (Daumal qtd. in Bachelard 42).

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***The Politics of Mythical Space in Pakistani Poetry Written in English***

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